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"Bloody Mary" by George Sinclair.

Most cocktail books include the story of a Frenchman named Fernand Petiot creating the Bloody Mary at Harry's New York Bar, which is situated in Paris, during the 1920s; with some even going so far as to specify 1921 as the exact year. But once the fact is made clear that Harry MacElhone hadn't even purchased his soon to be famous little bar yet, that was to happen in 1923, it seems only right to delve into specifics about the exact dates, and persons, involved.

Harry MacElhone was a well-known Scottish bartender of the day, having tended for a while in London, where he published his first book: Harry of Ciro's ABC of Mixing Cocktails: Over 300 Cocktail Recipes", by Harry MacElhone, 1921. Harry also bartended in the United States, at the Plaza in Manhattan, as well as Southern France. Harry went on to write many more cocktail books during his lifetime, interestingly with no mention of the Bloody Mary having been invented at his Paris bar. In fact, the nearest first mention of the Bloody Mary in one of Harry's book is in the 1941 edition of his "ABC of Mixing Cocktails", wherein he documents a vodka and tomato juice concoction called a "Red Mary".

Fernand Petiot was one of the first bartenders to work with Harry MacElhone in his newly acquired Paris bar, however he did not stay long, deciding to move to America in 1925. When you read the following newspaper excerpt you will be sure to notice that it states 1928 as the year he came to Ohio, but I have complete faith in David Wondrich, author of two cocktail books and cocktail writer for US Esquire magazine, when he informs me that 1925 was the year that Petiot arrived in the US. Arrived in US, 1925; check. Moved to Ohio, 1928; check.

January 8th 1975, Ohio Newspaper

"Petiot was born Feb. 18, 1900, in Paris, and began his bartending career at Harry's Bar in Paris -- a tavern frequented by American celebrities and journalists -- and came to Ohio in 1928 as assistant manager of the Canton Club, a businessman's luncheon club."

What is so important about the above information is that it contradicts the myth that Petiot went straight from Harry's New York Bar to the St. Regis Hotel in 1933, upon the repeal of Prohibition (1920-1933). And so it was at the repeal of Prohibition in 1933 that Fernand Petiot finally moved to New York City, to become head bartender and beverage and wine cellar manager at the St. Regis

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Hotel.

An interesting little bit of trivia for all you history buffs out there is that Fernand Petiot was the third person to be enrolled in the "International Order of Barflies" (I.O.B.); an international organisation of "alcohol appreciators", founded in MacElhone's bar, with Harry being the second barfly, and the journalist O.O. MacIntyre designated as the first. It was a rule of the Barflies that members were obliged not to strike their heads on the bar-top while passing out due to over-consumption of alcohol.

Although Fernand Petiot is the name most commonly associated with the Bloody Mary, possibly due to the makers of Tabasco Sauce, he was not the only one; A Jewish American Comedian by the name of George Jessel was also credited with the invention of the Bloody Mary:

San Mateo Times, 1955

"THE DRINK-MIXER: George Jessel, in full-page ads in magazines, announces that he invented the Bloody Mary, by mixing tomato juice with vodka. Those who know Jessel are aware that he doesn't care what he drinks, as long as it's booze."

As well as the above words, alluding to the Smirnoff Vodka Advertisement Campaign of that year, George Jessel was repeatedly cited as the inventor of the Bloody Mary by none other than Lucius Beebe, author of the Stork Club Bar Book, and regular contributor to the New York Herald Tribune in all matters alcohol.

The best evidence that George Jessell was more likely to actually have invented the Bloody Mary comes from an unlikely source; In July 1964, Fernand Petiot was interviewed for the **New Yorker Magazine**, and the subject was the origins of the Bloody Mary:

"George Jessel said he created it ["The Bloody Mary", says Petiot], but it was really nothing but vodka and tomato juice when I took it over. I cover the bottom of the shaker with four large dashes of salt, two dashes of black pepper, two dashes of cayenne pepper, and a layer of Worcestershire sauce; I then add a dash of lemon juice and some cracked ice, put in two ounces of vodka and two ounces of thick tomato juice, shake, strain, and pour. We serve a hundred to a hundred and fifty Bloody Marys a day here in the King Cole Room and in the other restaurants and the banquet rooms."

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The specific recipe which was used at the King Cole Room, which Ferdinand Petiot refers to, was chronicled in 'Crosby Gaige's Cocktail Guide and Ladies' Companion.' (1941), under the name of "Red Snapper".

NB: the Red Snapper is not a Gin-based concoction as some believe.

Red Snapper (1941)

1 1/2 ounces tomato juice
1 1/2 ounces vodka
2 dashes Worcestershire sauce
2 dashes fresh lemon juice
Salt to taste
Cayenne pepper to taste

Combine all ingredients. Shake, then strain into a chilled cocktail glass.

So if Fernand Petiot can not be credited with the christening of a mixed drink with the name Bloody Mary, nor with being the first person to mix Vodka and Tomato Juice, can he, at least, be given the honour of being the guy who spiced the drink up? Alas, no.

Following the introduction of canned Tomato Juice in the early 1920s, there was a deluge of non-alcoholic Tomato Juice Cocktail recipes in magazines and books; Remember that America was under the rule of the Volstead Act, meaning that methods of quenching ones thirst without resorting to alcohol had to be devised.

The Zanesville Signal, 1929.

"The tomato juice cocktail has taken its place in society..."

An anonymous woman is then quoted as saying:

"We have been serving tomato juice cocktails in our family for a number of years and consider them both delicious and valuable to our health."

A marketing man couldn't have said it better; then follows a recipe for the tomato juice cocktail, which was almost identical to a recipe, from the previous year, that was concocted for a Tomato Canners Convention :

Bedford Gazette, 24th August 1928:

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"1928 Tomato Juice Cocktail: Strain the contents of a No. 3 can of tomatoes (16 oz strained juice), one teaspoon salt, one and one-half teaspoons lemon juice, two-fifths teaspoon Worcestershire sauce and six drops of tabasco [sic] sauce. Shake, or mix thoroughly and serve ice cold."

The above recipe was noted as being "a bit different from any of its tomato cocktail predecessors". Exactly how is not stated, but there was an established tradition of non-alcoholic, spicey tomato juice being served at parties and social gatherings.

Whether you choice to believe George Jessel, or Fernand Petiot, as being personally reponsible for the initial mixing of vodka and tomato juice is immaterial; as surely as vodka is mixed with every non-alcoholic juice or mixer known to mankind, so it would have found its way into a glass of tomato juice eventually. George Jessel christened the vodka/tomato juice combination a "Bloody Mary"; but the spicing up of Tomato Juice was already an established tradition, and this would also have found itself being mixed with vodka eventually as well.

And so as this article draws to a close, I leave you with George Jessel's own account of how the Bloody Mary came to be:

The Chronicle Telegram, 26th December 1985.

"It was five in the morning and the bartender was sleeping when on impulse I mixed myself a glass of vodka, tomato juice and Worcestershire sauce [huh?]. I was sipping my drink when a girl named Mary joined me and asked for a taste. As I leaned over to offer her some of my brew, I lost my balance and spilled the drink all over her dress. Seeing her splashed all over in crimson, I was positively inspired. "Well," I cried out, "if you aren't Bloody Mary".